

PASTORAL PREACHING

If I speak God's Word with power, revealing all its mysteries and making everything as plain as day, and if I have faith that says to a mountain, "Jump," and it jumps, but I don't love, I am nothing.

I Cor. 13:2 (*The Message*)

Over the course of many years I have been called upon to be a guest preacher in a wide variety of churches, from African "bush" parishes, to rural town churches of the great plains, and now and then one of the city "tall steeples." I have tried to proclaim the Word with whatever faith and power that God has granted me. I believe that I have done it with love, love of that general kind that Christian folk share with one another. But that really isn't enough. As John Milton wrote of the English church in his day with it's dry academic sermons, "The hungry sheep look up, and are not fed." (*Lycidas*)

A sermon may be moving in its eloquence, intellectually exciting in its scholarship and craft, entertaining in its humor and story; but the same can be said of university lectures and political speeches. It can also be said of "televangelism," and the free Spirit of God can use any of them. But the sermon is far less likely to change hearts or transform lives if it does not emerge from a face to face and heart to heart relationship and the confidence that is inspired by the pastoral relationship. (Of course, that is the pastoral relationship at its functional best, and few achieve the ideal!)

That is the pastor's place, the shepherd who walks with the flock. He or she may not be blessed with eloquence or scholarship; but with that particular and personal love that shines through their life and embraces their congregation. If they exhibit that kind of love, and enabled by God's Spirit, the stammer's tongue will change lives. In a very real way, the preacher is the sermon. It should also be said that what applies to the sermon applies as well to the administration of the Sacraments, whatever the liturgical form.

I once read a book of sermons. I can't remember a single one of them. But I will never forget the dedication on the frontispiece:

*TO THE UNKNOWN PREACHER,
Whose obscure and sacrificial life is so hid in Christ with God,
as to be forever fruitful.*

C.B.H.
April 30, 2008